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# MARTIAL ARTS STUDIES AS KULTURWISSENSCHAFT

## A POSSIBLE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

## SIXT WETZLER

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## ABSTRACT

This essay deals with some of the key theoretical issues of martial arts studies: the definition of martial arts, the possible objects of research, adequate methods, and the search for an applicable theoretical framework. After a very short introduction to the German-speaking martial arts studies (from whence the following ideas derive), the differences between Anglophone cultural studies and German Kulturwissenschaften will be briefly shown. The text will then discuss the problem of normative/object-language arguments in martial arts studies, and follow with a critical assessment of terminological distinctions between terms like 'martial arts', 'combat sports', etc. As an alternative, a very wide working definition of martial arts will be proposed, as well as five dimensions of meaning ascribed to martial arts practice, which can help analyzing any given martial arts style. In a next step, the various actualizations of martial arts, from body images to cultural contexts, will be grouped into classes of phenomena. Then, Itamar Even-Zohar's polysystem theory (devised for the study of literature) will be introduced and its applicability to martial arts studies demonstrated. Finally, a short discussion will highlight the method of scientific comparison.

## INTRODUCTION

In this article, some of the theoretical, terminological, and methodological issues of martial arts studies shall be discussed and a possible theoretical framework presented. These basic approaches were derived from discussions within the German-speaking martial arts studies (or *Kampfkunstwissenschaft*) community.<sup>1</sup>

A German-speaking network of researchers in the field of martial arts and combat sports has developed in parallel to the emergence of the English language martial arts studies literature.<sup>2</sup> The turning point in this development was the 2011 founding conference of the *Kommission Kampfkunst und Kampfsport* (Commission for Martial Arts and Combat Sports) within the *Deutsche Vereinigung für Sportwissenschaft* (German Association for Sports Science). An interdisciplinary endeavour from the beginning, the *Kommission* has worked in the last four years to collect the various, often very heterogeneous academic approaches towards the subject that have been made in Germany, Switzerland, and Austria since the late 19th century. Annual conferences have been held since 2011, and four conference volumes have been published so far.<sup>3</sup>

Martial arts studies research within the *Kommission Kampfkunst und Kampfsport* can mainly be divided into three branches: first, educational/ pedagogical perspectives and health care, both physical and mental; second, historical, anthropological, and sociological perspectives; and third, movement sciences and training theory. This article is geared towards the second branch, the cultural studies perspective (or, more

precisely, the *Kulturwissenschaftliche Perspektive*). The questions this perspective engages are those of the forms in which martial arts exist, their development, the meanings practitioners ascribe to them, how they are embedded in their cultural contexts, and so on. The ideas presented here derive from the author's experiences at the German conferences.

On the one hand, the *Kommission Kampfkunst und Kampfsport* has been successful in uniting a significant number of the German-speaking researchers active in the field. On the other hand, it became apparent that we are in need of a theoretical framework to guarantee the quality of future work.<sup>4</sup> So my aim here is to examine how to integrate the different approaches into a coherent, meaningful field of research, instead of a loosely connected collection of individual projects. My proposal is that three basic questions have to be considered: First, what are the objects that martial arts studies can or has to deal with? Second, what are the sources that martial arts studies needs to take into consideration? Third, what methods could be used by martial arts studies researchers to approach these objects and sources?

This article suggests answers to these questions. More specifically, it will address two of the main problems encountered in the discussions of recent years. The first of these relates to the clarity of object-language versus metalanguage and the problem of terminological pitfalls (whether we use terms like 'martial arts', 'combat sports', 'self-defence', etc.). I will then argue for an open description of the concept of 'martial arts'. This concept will be described as a network of *different dimensions of meaning ascribed to martial arts practices*. These are actualized in various *classes of phenomena* that, at the same time, are the objects to be analysed and the sources from which to draw our information. Finally, a theory will be proposed that may help us to understand and explain the concept of martial arts in its complexity, and a method briefly described by which its unique *dimensions of meaning* and *classes of phenomena* can be approached.

<sup>1</sup> Theoretical and methodological issues were first presented in English as a 'key questions' lecture at the Martial Arts Studies Conference held 10-12 June 2015 at Cardiff University. This lecture, in turn, was based on the article 'Vergleichende Kampfkunstwissenschaft als historisch-kulturwissenschaftliche Disziplin. Mögliche Gegenstände, nötige Quellen, anzuwendende Methoden' [Wetzler 2014a]. The English article at hand is a revised and expanded version of this earlier German text.

<sup>2</sup> For the most recent and detailed discussion of if and how martial arts studies can be understood as a 'field', see Bowman [2015: 1-54]. Herein, Paul Bowman writes: 'If martial arts studies is to blossom into a field – a discrete field of academic study – this will not just happen, as if naturally. Rather, martial arts studies must be created'. [Bowman 2015: 4] And he argues that 'the self-conscious elaboration of such a field that is currently taking place should proceed in full awareness of the stakes and critical potentials of such elaboration and construction' [Bowman 2015: 2]. I hope that this article can be a small step in both directions: in further creating martial arts studies as an academic field and in critically reflecting on our own constructions.

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed description of the current state of martial arts studies in Germany, see the *Kommission's* website (<http://www.sportwissenschaft.de>), especially the article 'The Development and Current State of Martial Arts Studies in Germany' [Wetzler 2015] which first appeared on Benjamin Judkin's blog *Kung Fu Tea* (<http://chinesemartialstudies.com/>).

<sup>4</sup> The 2015 conference, held from September 30th through October 2nd at the University of Mainz, dealt with theoretical and methodological questions, especially with the difficulties of defining 'subject' and 'field'. The results will be published in 2016. The conference title 'Martial Arts Studies in Germany – Defining and Crossing Disciplinary Boundaries' was decided on in 2014, before Paul Bowman announced the title of his book *Martial Arts Studies: Disrupting Disciplinary Boundaries* [2015]. However, the similarity is no coincidence, but instead reflects the very nature of our field. A fruitful, monodisciplinary approach towards martial arts is hardly conceivable much less desirable.

## CULTURAL STUDIES AND KULTURWISSENSCHAFTEN

Before explaining theory and methodology, a few words on the similarities and dissimilarities of the concepts behind Anglophone cultural studies and German *Kulturwissenschaften* are needed. I myself was not aware of these differences when I travelled to the first Martial Arts Studies Conference in Cardiff in June 2015, and some of the descriptions and methods of my English-speaking colleagues were at first difficult for me to follow. It was only after the conference that I was made aware of a lucid article that Lutz Musner had written on the problem [Musner 2001], and I believe that a short summary of his observations may foster a better understanding between Anglophone and German martial arts studies.<sup>5</sup>

Even though *Kulturwissenschaften* may best be translated into English as ‘cultural studies’, Musner makes clear that the two approaches are not the same. Instead, he calls the two disciplines *ungleiche Geschwister*, or ‘uneven sisters’ [Musner 2001: 261], and he writes:

**Cultural studies developed in post-war England as a socio-political project, while German *Kulturwissenschaften* were motivated by academic politics. The first are [or try to be] a political project sui generis, while the second are a process of innovation, which refers to academic subjects and originated from undeniable symptoms of a crisis of the humanities.<sup>6</sup>**  
[Musner 2001: 262]

Musner then points out that the ‘social and cultural marginalisation experienced by minorities, immigrants, women, and sexually discriminated [communities] played a central role in the formulation of theories’ in English-speaking cultural studies, and that the ‘critical approach towards marginality, discrimination, and the corresponding self-images is a key topos of cultural studies and essentially defines

<sup>5</sup> The direct relevance of the discussion for our work is demonstrated by the fact that Musner explicitly mentions Meaghan Morris as a leading cultural studies scholar and quotes her book *Too Soon, Too Late: History and Cultural Studies* [1998]. Morris in fact gave one of the keynote lectures at the 2015 Cardiff Martial Arts Studies conference. Thanks to Eric Burkart for pointing out Musner’s text to me.

<sup>6</sup> ‘Die Cultural Studies entstanden im England der Nachkriegszeit als ein gesellschaftspolitisches Projekt, die Kulturwissenschaften hingegen in Deutschland und aus einer wissenschaftspolitischen Motivationslage heraus. Die einen sind oder versuchen zumindest ein politisches Projekt sui generis zu sein, während die anderen ein fächerbezogenes Innovationsverfahren sind, das aus unübersehbaren Krisensymptomen der Geisteswissenschaften heraus entstanden ist’. All translations from German to English by the author.

their political credo’<sup>7</sup> [Musner 2001: 263]. The key subjects of *Kulturwissenschaften*, on the other hand, are “memory”, “symbol”, “system”, or “mediality”. Their central methods are philology, hermeneutics, and historiography, while cultural studies are more concerned with discourses and cultural practices and less with their historical meaning’ [Musner 2001: 266].

However, both approaches seem to be connected by a *Band der Komplementarität*, a ‘bond of complementarity’. This means that, while *Kulturwissenschaften* provide a deeper understanding of history, memory, and tradition, cultural studies focuses more on the experiences of social marginalisation and friction [Musner 2001: 269]. These things are not mutually exclusive, of course. On the contrary, once the methodological differences are understood as mostly a language barrier, this barrier can be overcome, and the results of one approach can fertilize the other. This is equally true for the sub-disciplines of English-speaking martial arts studies and German *Kampfkunstwissenschaft*.

My own scientific take on martial arts is firmly rooted in German *Kulturwissenschaften* or, more precisely, in *Religionswissenschaften* (religious studies) as coined by authors like Burkhard Gladigow, Jan and Aleida Assmann, or Hubert Cancik. These academics developed their theories in the study of pre-Christian Mediterranean culture and religion, and they fit Musner’s analysis very neatly.

In light of this, we shall now turn to the aforementioned problems: ‘object-language versus metalanguage’ and ‘terminological pitfalls’.

## OBJECT-LANGUAGE VERSUS METALANGUAGE

This is a problem that should be self-evident, but my experience suggests that it has yet to be addressed. Some of the contributions to martial arts scholarship in recent years reveal the extent to which many authors feel obligated not only to their own academic discipline but also to the respective styles of martial arts that they study. In some cases, this has led to misunderstandings within the community. We were encountering, so to speak, a twofold interdisciplinary language barrier, caused by the fact that researchers approach the scientific object

<sup>7</sup> ‘So spielten im weiteren Verlauf die gesellschaftlichen und kulturellen Marginalisierungserfahrungen von Minderheiten und MigrantInnen, von Frauen und sexuell Diskriminierten eine wesentliche Rolle in der Theoriebildung. Die kritische Auseinandersetzung mit Marginalität, Diskriminierung und damit korrespondierenden Selbst-Bildern ist ein wesentlicher Topos der Cultural Studies und bestimmt ihr eigentliches, ihr politisches Credo.’



‘martial arts’ from the implicit perspectives of their own academic and martial arts backgrounds. This problem became most evident when contributions worked with the terms and concepts of the object-language and tried to elevate them to appropriate descriptive tools of a metalanguage [as in the case of *qi*].

Such problems, however, are not new to the discourses of the humanities. A look at religious studies can serve as an example. This discipline had to struggle for decades (and, in some parts of the academic community, is still struggling) to eliminate normative assumption from its methodology [Gladigow 2005: 41-42]. The strict distinction between religious studies and theology can serve as a model for martial arts studies. In other words, our task is not to describe, for example, ‘how the *qi* flows’, but rather, ‘how certain practitioners of internal Chinese martial arts *believe* the *qi* flows’.

## TERMINOLOGICAL PITFALLS: MARTIAL ARTS, COMBAT SPORTS, AND SELF-DEFENCE

Those who argue within the frame of their own style’s object-language are often the same people who have no difficulty in deciding which movement traditions qualify as ‘proper’ martial arts and which do not. However, this issue too is not at all easy to adjudicate. The criteria that define one movement system as a martial art and disqualify another are hard to establish – and even more so in an intercultural context. Since the term ‘martial arts’ is widely used in colloquial language, everyone brings along an intuitive understanding of what it denotes. As with all general terms, at the core of this intuitive semantic field lies a group of phenomena that most people would agree to call ‘martial arts’ without giving it much thought. But the field becomes less and less clear towards its edges, where we find phenomena whose classification as a martial art can be disputed.

The common assumption (also among scholars) of what the term includes often seems also to subsume the field of combat sports. Note that so far no one seems to have felt the need to call for an individual discipline of ‘combat sports studies’.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, our intuitive

understanding of the term ‘martial art’ is why most readers would expect to find articles on topics like aikido or Ronda Rousey in this journal, but not articles on ballet or Lance Armstrong. In this respect, it is the pre-scientific bias that first enables us to create and develop martial arts studies. Readers may wish to check their own understanding: Is Shotokan karate a martial art? Is judo a martial art? What about taijiquan and Olympic fencing? Or possibly MMA and krav maga? How about the ritualized fencing of German student fraternities, arranged hooligan brawls, and combat shooting with handguns? Even if classifying some of these things as martial arts may seem counter-intuitive, all of them include aspects that could be analysed as topics of martial arts studies.

As we take the step from colloquial language to scientific discourse, the question arises: How can we define martial arts? The problems involved in defining one’s own subject are well known in the humanities, and they certainly apply to martial arts studies. Religious studies have never reached a generally accepted definition of religion, political sciences struggle to define politics, and so on. Nevertheless, these and other sciences are able to work on their respective fields and produce results. The same is true for martial arts studies. On the one hand, the search for the ‘perfect’, unifying definition can inspire understanding and self-reflection. Yet it must be acknowledged that such a search hardly ever reaches its goal. It therefore makes more sense, and is much more practical for the ‘daily work’ of the martial arts studies scholar, to assume a minimal definition of the field. Such a definition has to be wide enough to encompass a heterogeneous multiplicity of phenomena without becoming so general as to include each and every possible thing. On the basis of such a minimal definition, the phenomena identified as relevant to the topic can then be analysed individually and according to their form, content, and meaning, rather than by checking whether and how well they fit into predefined, superimposed moulds.

One possible minimal definition that might serve this purpose is that proposed by Peter Lorge in his book *Chinese Martial Arts: From Antiquity to the Twenty-First Century* [2012]. Confronted with the historical, geographical, and phenotypical vastness of his topic, he writes:

I define ‘martial arts’ as the various skills or practices that originated as methods of combat. This definition therefore includes many performance, religious, or health-promoting activities that no longer have any direct combat applications but clearly originated in combat, while possibly excluding references to these techniques in dance, for example. Admittedly, the distinctions can be muddled as one activity shades into another. In addition, what makes something a martial art rather than an action done by someone who is

8 However, sometimes both terms are used to denote the field, as in the case for example of the International Martial Arts and Combat Sports Scientific Society that has held several international conferences on the topic over the last few years ([www.imacsss.com](http://www.imacsss.com)), or by the aforementioned **German Kommission Kampfkunst und Kampfsport**. While in German **Kampfsport** is the more widely used term, both words stand in singular, in contrast to their English correspondents. This is noteworthy insofar as the singular implies even more so a sense of homogeneity between the different styles.

naturally good at fighting is that the techniques are taught. Without the transmission of these skills through teaching, they do not constitute an 'art' in the sense of being a body of information or techniques that aim to reproduce certain knowledge or effects.<sup>9</sup>  
[Lorge 2012: 3-4]

Three addenda have to be made: First, 'methods of combat' should be understood as all methods for the wide continuum of physical struggle, from convivial wrestling and controlled force application in retention scenarios to fighting with lethal intent. We may assume that 'methods of combat' on all levels of force and violent intent have always existed alongside each other. (Also, the historical primacy of combat over dance movements might be often difficult to prove.) Second, Lorge's emphasis on transmission fits the historical report, but it should maybe be softened to the concepts of 'reproducibility' and 'systematization'. Though it may have been the historical exception (if it ever happened at all), the martial arts hermit training his fighting skills in solitude atop the mountain is at least imaginable. His systematized skills could also be counted as martial arts. Third, 'transmission' and 'teaching' are in themselves terms whose scope has to be discussed. If, for instance, visual learning counts as transmission, that would classify the fighting movements copied by school kids from computer games also as martial arts skills – even more, since modern games use motion capturing of professional martial artists for their programming. Taken to the extreme, this leads to the question of whether completely ineffective movements, copied without proper tuition but wrapped in martial arts imagery, have to be counted as martial arts. Is everything a martial art as long as the protagonist understands it as such?<sup>10</sup>

If we accept the proposed minimal definition and the addenda, we can re-assess the terminological and methodological problems that accompany any attempted distinction between 'martial arts', 'combat sports', and 'self-defence'.

A popular distinction heard among both outsiders and martial artists alike defines the martial arts as oriented either towards tradition/philosophy or self-defence. This separates them from competitive

combat sports. Within the martial arts community additional terms are in use, often by practitioners of self-defence systems. With them, they intend to emphasize their 'purely realistic' approach: terms like 'practical self-defence', 'hybrid systems', 'combatives', and 'CQC [close quarter combat] systems' can be found. The tripartite distinction 'martial arts – combat sports – self-defence', employed by practitioners, is mirrored in the triadic model which Alex Channon and George Jennings have used in their article 'Exploring Embodiment through Martial Arts and Combat Sports: A Review of Empirical Research':

Thus, we have adopted the aforementioned term 'martial arts and combat sports' [MACS], which we propose be used as an inclusive, triadic model encompassing competition-oriented combat sports, military/civilian self-defence systems, and traditionalist or non-competitive martial arts, as well as activities straddling these boundaries.  
[Channon and Jennings 2014: 4]

All these distinctions are as helpful as they are deceiving. For although, on a first glance, many of the better known 'standard' martial arts can be classified into one of the three categories, a closer look reveals how poorly the categories depict reality. If we take, for example, Shotokan karate, as one of the most widespread styles of martial arts, we can see that the very same style can either be trained as traditional art, as competition sport, or as 'street' self-defence, depending on teacher and school. In most schools, it will encompass all three categories. Furthermore, the category 'traditionalist or non-competitive martial arts' is explained by Channon and Jennings as 'traditionalist, mind-body disciplines, or "Eastern movement forms", such as kung fu and taijiquan' [Channon and Jennings 2014: 3].<sup>11</sup> This definition quickly unravels and proves to be more of a hindrance than a help. Movement forms from the acrobatic performances of the Beijing opera to martial arts-inspired folk dances in pencak silat and even meditative practices like kyudo would have to be included, and this without even addressing the problem of 'invented traditions'. In a global perspective, the 'Eastern' component should be dropped altogether, as martial arts exist and have existed in all corners of the earth.

Finally [at least in the German-speaking martial arts studies], the constructed dichotomy *Kampfkunst* versus *Kampfsport* has helped to institute imagined differences in the social value of respective styles [see Leffler 2010]. Brought forth mostly by protagonists of Japanese budo disciplines – sometimes implicitly, sometimes explicitly – 'true' martial

<sup>9</sup> Compare another recent definition proposed by Alex Channon and George Jennings: 'Thus, our fundamental criteria for inclusion within the MACS [Martial Arts and Combat Sports] model here involves the requirement of some form of orientation towards improving/measuring "martial" or "combative" abilities – regardless of how this is lived out in actual practice' [Channon and Jennings 2014: 4].

<sup>10</sup> Martin Meyer has raised this question in his lecture on the 'kamehameha-problem' at the *Kommission Kampfkunst und Kampfsport*'s conference 2015; see the forthcoming conference volume for a written version (<http://goo.gl/cd12j3>).

<sup>11</sup> Channon and Jennings, in turn, borrowed the term from David Brown and Aspasia Leledaki's article 'Eastern Movement Forms as Body-Self Transforming Cultural Practices in the West: Towards a Sociological Perspective' [2010].

arts allegedly aim for the perfection of one's self and are of greater value than 'primitive' agonistic combat sports. Whereas there might indeed be differences in the applicability of martial arts for pedagogical or health care reasons, such normative judgements are wholly unacceptable from the perspective of *Kulturwissenschaften*.

The insufficient descriptive value of a terminological distinction between 'martial arts', 'combat sports', and 'self-defence', and the normative undertones this distinction often carries, are strong indicators that it is not in fact useful for the pursuit of martial arts studies. Thus, an alternative shall be proposed: Instead of trying to establish discernible sub-categories, all phenomena that fit the above minimal definition should be subsumed under the term martial arts. This would reflect both the aforementioned intuitive understanding of the term martial arts as well as actual academic reality; combat sports studies or self-defence studies are safely embedded within martial arts studies. In other words, 'martial arts' is chosen to denote the field of study as it is most widely used. However, convenience is not the only reason for this decision. Another is the term's long history. It stands in line with similar expressions, from the European Middle Ages onwards, when close combat practices were called *ars*, e.g., *ars dimicatoria*, and counted among the court arts. Art, in this context, does not bear the meaning of 'creative expression of the human mind' but of 'skilful execution of a difficult action'. As such, it spilled over into several European vernaculars during the Middle Ages. The proposed use of the term 'martial arts', then, is neither new nor arbitrary. It has its roots in a centuries-old convention.

'Martial arts' shall thus be used here as an umbrella term, allowing us to speak about the totality of our topic. In contrast to this general expression, we can use the word 'style' to denote an individual tradition, imagined as a coherent entity from the inside, and more or less clearly distinguishable from the outside. Examples may include wing chun, Turkish oil wrestling, or the medieval Liechtenauer school of fencing. While other terms, like 'system' or 'tradition', could also be used, 'style' is preferred here for being less prone to misunderstandings in the ongoing discussion. This, however, provokes the next problem: Where exactly are the borders between one style and the next? How big can [or must] a style be? What are the parameters to define a style?

To take a look at a prominent example, should we subsume all incarnations of karate as one style? Or is Shotokan one style, and kyokushin the next? Or are the various sub-divisions of Shotokan and kyokushin our units of analysis? Or is a style any individual interpretation of one school, one teacher, or even one student?

When Mas Oyama, the founder of kyokushin karate, raised the question *What is Karate?* with the title of his book in 1966, and faithfully answered it himself in his 1972 book *This is Karate*, he could only do so as a practitioner. In other words, in object-language. In metalanguage, martial arts studies should classify all those styles as karate that call themselves karate. Their dividing lines are where their practitioners perceive them to be. For many devoted practitioners, this approach might seem too generous towards invented styles and traditions. But it can represent the various modes of tradition, transmission, and copying that exist in the martial arts more faithfully than any superimposed list of criteria for an individual style's 'authenticity'. Furthermore, it can easily cope with the fact that a large part of the existing styles derive not from a single origin but are syncretistic by nature.

Making ourselves aware of such definition problems is fundamental for martial arts studies. They do not come as a surprise. The humanities face similar difficulties in all fields. The question presently under consideration – 'What is martial arts?' – is of the same quality as, for example, the questions, 'What is folk music? What is mannerism? What is magic?' Such difficulties are not flaws that need to be repaired, but a result of the complexity of our topic, where all clear cut distinctions must remain lexical illusions.

## DIMENSIONS OF MEANING

Instead of creating boxes to put the existing styles in, we could rather search for common, recurring qualities in the martial arts. A discussion of a given style can then analyse how these qualities are fulfilled, and to what degree. Five common qualities of the martial arts shall be proposed here, which will be called *dimensions of meaning ascribed to martial arts practices*, or – for short – *five dimensions*. When presented to other scholars, the five dimensions of meaning have sometimes been misunderstood as a solid structure into which specific martial arts can be forced.

This is the opposite of what I want to achieve. For, firstly, I would not claim that the list is definite. Other dimensions may be devised. Secondly, it is not a collection of necessary or sufficient conditions that define a movement system as a martial arts style. And not every style must actualize all five dimensions. The list is nothing more than a tool that could help us to take recurring patterns of martial arts into perspective, and to describe a given style more adequately. The five dimensions that I propose are the following:

#### *Dimension 1: Preparation for Violent Conflict*

The preparation for hostile physical conflict, in civilian and military contexts, with the aim of protecting one's own physical integrity, destroying the opponent's capacity to do harm, and compelling him to one's own will. As important as the actual increase in physical capacities is the function as a psychological coping strategy, to deal with the fear of possible or imagined violence.

#### *Dimension 2: Play and Competitive Sports*

The convivial practice of physical struggle, within set rules and frames, but usually without the intent to physically destroy; such practice can be done 'for fun', or for the prize of winning a competition.

#### *Dimension 3: Performance*

The display of martial techniques and combat skills before an audience; for example as part of a ritual, for entertainment purposes, or as self-allocation within certain social contexts. Of course, the audience can also be the practitioner him- or herself. The dimension of performance is often perceived as a symptom of corruption of 'true' martial arts, where efficient technique is blurred by movements only performed to please the audience. This is another notion of object-language that should not spill over into our work. The dimension of performance is actually the rule rather than an exception in the history of martial arts.

#### *Dimension 4: Transcendent Goals*

This wide area comprises the connections martial arts have to spiritual and philosophical practices. Also included are their intended pedagogical uses to educate or form the character of the practitioners, and their function as connection to (imagined) otherwise unreachable entities of (martial) culture (e.g. 'our medieval forefathers/the samurai/the special forces'). Transcendent goals can be openly stated trademarks or implicit agendas.

#### *Dimension 5: Health Care*

This is the use of martial arts for prophylactic and/or therapeutic purposes, mostly in physical but also psychological contexts.

For martial arts studies, these five dimensions should stand equally beside one another. From a perspective of cultural studies/*Kulturwissenschaften*, Mexican show wrestling – something like the quintessence of *Dimension 3: Performance* – can be just as valuable a topic as Chen-style taijiquan, or World War II CQC training. This will also help to denounce any notion of 'original', 'pure', or 'more true' martial arts. These categories may be important within the mythic thinking of object-language, but on the meta level, they have to be discarded

as illusions, just like any evolutionism that proclaims a teleological development of the martial arts towards ever more effective fighting systems [Amberger 1999: 2].

Of course, there are no solid boundaries between these five dimensions: they will overlap in several places. Nevertheless, they may help to sharpen our view of the martial arts. Any given style can be analysed according to these five dimensions, and their functions within cultural contexts can be described. Only then does it become possible to discuss various styles at the same time, and compare them side by side.<sup>12</sup>

## CLASSES OF PHENOMENA

The forms and degrees to which a given style fulfils one or more of the five dimensions are not self-evident. They have to be deduced from the actual phenomena that construct the style's existence. For the researcher's convenience, these phenomena can be arranged into classes. The classes display varying degrees of abstraction and will be presented here in order, from most tangible to abstract. Since many of the phenomena are not exclusive to a single style, they can be put into context both vertically and horizontally. Vertically, they represent part or all of the actualizations and the repertoire of a single style. Horizontally, they represent features of martial arts which are shared by several styles. They can be the object of comparative analysis (I will say more on this below). In a third dimension, depth, the historicity of all these phenomena has to be taken into account.

Some *classes of phenomena* are as follows. Again, this list is not definite:

*The Body:* As obvious as it may sound, martial arts are physical activities. The human body is the foremost tool with which they are expressed, and also the canvas on which practitioners paint their martial self-image. Often, a style implies a certain 'ideal' body type, both for athletic and aesthetic reasons. Attitudes towards the body can thus be discussed on practitioner and style levels.

<sup>12</sup> A question often raised here is, 'Why did the martial arts lose most of their significance in the West while they thrived in the East?' Apart from the ignorance vis-à-vis historical developments in both East and West betrayed by this question, a possible explanation for the strong position of the Asian martial arts might be that they were more successful in fulfilling the five dimensions of meaning, thus solidly integrating martial arts into contexts that, in the West, have become dominated by other cultural systems, like medicine, theatre, firearms, esotericism, the gymnastic movement, etc.



**Movement/Techniques:** The most obvious yet also the most difficult class to understand and describe. As Eric Burkart has recently pointed out, martial arts skills, 'being body techniques and tacit knowing, can only be communicated interpersonally to a certain degree. For a complete understanding, the re-enacting, or re-living with one's own body is inevitable' [Burkart 2014: 259-260].<sup>13</sup>

The methodological problems are obvious: How can I be sure that my tacit knowing is congruent with that of another person? How much training is necessary to understand a technique? Can movements be understood from the outside, and does it make sense at all to extract them from their style's context? Researchers cannot perform movements that the practitioners of a style train for years and hope for the same bodily sensation. And since many researchers are trained martial artists themselves, there is the imminent danger of interpreting new movements through the lens of one's own style. However, these problems do not prohibit the study of this class of phenomena, nor are they an excuse to avoid it. If anything, they encourage an even greater degree of self-reflection.

**Tactics/Concepts:** Tactics and concepts are the premises that guide the selection of techniques on a functional level, and their application. A single technique, like a wrist lock, may be found in dozens of martial arts all over the world. However, when and how to apply it might be judged very differently. Tactics and concepts reflect the area in which a given style is used, and its risk assessment. What would make sense in one combative environment, and would therefore be highlighted in one style, might be dysfunctional in another one.

**Weapons/Materiality:** The material perspective is of the greatest importance in martial arts studies. The widespread assumption that martial arts have always and everywhere been mainly empty hands combat systems does not fit the historical evidence. At least where *Dimension 1: Preparation for Violent Conflict* is a prime motive, the use of weapons is the rule, not the exception. Understanding a style's movements and concepts cannot be achieved without understanding of the physical properties of its weapons. Furthermore, the weapons' symbolic value is often a defining part of the practitioners' self-image. The sword as a paramount symbol in human culture has to be pointed out especially. Beyond weaponry, we must consider the information that other objects carry, both on practical and symbolic levels: clothing, training equipment, the training area, etc.

<sup>13</sup> '...als Körpertechniken [...] und als implizites Wissen (tacit knowings) jedoch nur bedingt intersubjektiv kommunizierbar. Zum vollständigen Verständnis ist für Dritte immer der Nachvollzug, das Nacherleben mit dem eigenen Körper notwendig.'

**Media Representation:** Many styles possess written accounts of their teaching. At the intersection of material culture and teaching methodology, such writings can be approached from the perspectives of, among others, linguistics, literature, history, art history, or training sciences. On the other hand, the absence of written accounts can attest to a secretive tradition of techniques, or a certain dynamic approach to teaching. In modern times, written accounts stand alongside photographic and cinematographic depictions of martial arts. Their use as teaching material is not necessarily the dominant purpose. Often, self-promotion seems just as important (see YouTube). In a further step, the use of martial arts in other genres of media is to be taken into account, most notably for entertainment – from Chinese *Wuxia* literature to martial arts cinema or beat-'em-up computer games.

**Teaching Methodology/Learning Process:** 'The secret is not the technique, but how the technique is given to the student', a martial arts saying goes. Even though various styles may share identical applications of certain martial arts techniques, the same styles can vary dramatically in their methods of anchoring these techniques as tacit knowing in their students. Often, didactic theory and its practical implementation can be described precisely.

**Myths/Philosophy:** Myths are understood here as the explicit narratives that create the world that their narrators perceive, lay the foundations for their interaction with the world, and legitimize this interaction. Thus, they 'authoritatively regulate the manifold arrays of social life' [Assmann and Assmann 1998: 180].<sup>14</sup> Especially important are the founding myths told in many styles [Wetzler 2014b]. Related to the myths, but not the same, are explicit and implicit philosophies. As ideological frameworks, they answer questions on the necessity and meaning of training, the importance of martial arts in the practitioners' lives, and also attitude towards violence and the value of physical and psychological integrity. While mythic narrations are presented in word, picture, and movement, philosophies sometimes have to be deduced from the internal discourse and external presentation of a style.

**Social Structures:** The quality of martial arts as knowledge imparted from one person to another leads to their shape as networks of interpersonal relations and dependencies. The dichotomy teacher-student generates hierarchies that are fundamental for the organisation of many styles. Such bilateral relationships are accompanied by complex relations between more or less experienced co-students, grandmasters, and other teachers of the same style. The analogy to a family tree, as used in Chinese martial arts, can be useful as a conceptual parallel even if coined by the object-language. The individual's privileges and duties within

<sup>14</sup> 'Die vielfältigen Ordnungen des sozialen Lebens verbindlich zu regeln.'

such structures, and the ensuing social dynamics within a style, are two of the eminent subjects for research.

**Wider Cultural Context:** Any style is a product of the culture surrounding it, and both stand in reciprocal relation. Martial arts can be perceived as a system promoting stabilization or even dangerous divergence. They can be used as vehicles to convey desired social values. They can be of central or peripheral interest to a culture. Especially were martial skills are an integral part of the self-fashioning of social elites, this cultural context has to be taken into account for an adequate description of a style. Also, the connections between several styles that exist within one cultural system have to be considered.

All these phenomena serve both as objects and sources for martial arts studies. In the study of historical European martial arts, for example, considerable linguistic, codicological, and art historical work has been undertaken on the medieval and early modern fight books. In these cases, they were the object of study. However, when the movements and techniques of medieval European fighting are analysed, the same books become the main sources for research.

## POLYSYSTEM THEORY AND COMPARATIVE APPROACH

It is apparent that the common denominator of the issues touched upon so far is their fluid aggregate state – the impossibility of drawing clear-cut boundaries and finding solid definitions. We have noted so far: the lexical illusion of ‘martial arts’ vs. ‘combat sport’ vs. ‘self-defence’; the problem of defining a martial arts style as an individual entity; the problem of most styles’ syncretistic nature; the overlaps between the five dimensions of meaning ascribed to martial arts; and the shifting of the classes of phenomena between being objects and sources of study. Consequently, we need a theoretical framework that is properly able to deal with the slippery nature of martial arts as a scientific topic. As pointed out earlier, martial arts studies is not the first scientific endeavour to encounter this kind of problem. It is worth taking a look at the theoretical work that has been done in other academic fields and the results they provide.

One theory that seems extraordinarily well-suited to martial arts studies is the ‘polysystem theory’ coined by Itamar Even-Zohar [Even-Zohar 1990]. On the basis of Russian formalism of the early 20th century, Even-Zohar devised a theory for the study of literature that conceived of literature and literary texts ‘not as an isolated activity in society, regulated by laws exclusively [and inherently] different from all the rest of the human activities, but as an integral – often central and very

powerful – factor among the latter’ [Even-Zohar 1990: 4]. To Even-Zohar, literature as well as other cultural systems have to be perceived and described as ‘polysystems’:

**A semiotic system can be conceived of as a heterogeneous, open structure. It is, therefore, very rarely a uni-system but is, necessarily, a polysystem – a multiple system, a system of various systems which intersect with each other and partly overlap, using concurrently different options, yet functioning as one structured whole, whose members are interdependent. [Even-Zohar 1990: 11]**

In this respect,

**the term ‘polysystem’ is more than just a terminological convention. Its purpose is to make explicit the conception of a system as dynamic and heterogeneous in opposition to the synchronistic approach. It thus emphasizes the multiplicity of intersections and hence the greater complexity of structuredness involved. [Even-Zohar 1990: 12]**

Even-Zohar’s theory has been adopted – and fruitfully so – by literary studies, especially concerning questions of translated literatures, in language studies, and other disciplines. Mutatis mutandis, it can also be applied to martial arts studies.

Polysystem theory is complex, and can hardly be summarized in a few words. However, some examples may demonstrate how aptly it can describe martial arts as dynamic, ever-changing entities, dependent contingent upon their cultural context.

In many countries of the world in the 21st century, several martial arts exist side by side. With clubs and schools of different styles in every big city, they compete for practitioners, reputation, and resources. How do these systems stand in relation to each other, and to the surrounding cultural systems? Even-Zohar writes that:

**Systems are not equal, but hierarchized within the polysystem. It is the permanent struggle between the various strata ... which constitutes the (dynamic) synchronic state of the system. It is the victory of one stratum over another which constitutes the change on the diachronic axis. In this centrifugal vs. centripetal motion, phenomena are driven from the centre to the periphery while, conversely, phenomena may push their way into the centre and occupy it. However, with a polysystem one must not think in terms of one centre and one periphery,**

since several such positions are hypothesized. A move may take place, for instance, whereby a certain item (element, function) is transferred from the periphery of one system to the periphery of an adjacent system within the same polysystem, and then may or may not move on to the centre of the latter. [Even-Zohar 1990: 13-14]

Transferred to the development of the Asian martial arts in Western culture within recent decades, this means: The total realm of the martial arts is the polysystem in question, which can itself be understood as a system within the ultimate polysystem 'culture'. The cultural meaning of the polysystem 'martial arts' is not monolithic, but instead consists of several systems that each have their own relevance within the polysystem. Such systems might be 'use for self-defence' or 'preferred way of combat for the silver screen', while the 'items' that occupy these systems are the individual martial arts styles.

To clarify with an example: Upon its arrival in the West, karate was perceived mostly for the *Dimension 1: Preparation for Violent Conflict*, and thus at the centre of the system 'self-defence'. However, it has been driven to the periphery of 'self-defence' by other styles, especially by wing chun, which was then in turn driven from the centre by krav maga. Regarding the perception of *Dimension 2: Play and Competitive Sports*, karate was again driven from a centre, this time of the category 'tough combat sport', in this case by kickboxing, which was replaced by Muay Thai, which was replaced by MMA. However, not all is lost for karate. When the style held the centre of the self-defence system, it also had a connotation of being a pastime for bullies and hooligans. While losing the centres of those systems karate was able to gain ground in the systems including 'martial arts for pedagogical purposes' and 'self-perfection by Eastern practices' (both systems obviously representing *Dimension 4: Transcendent Goals*), whose centres it shares today with other Japanese budo styles, along with yoga, qigong, and various meditation practices in the second case.

On the other hand, this model also makes us aware that martial arts may have to compete with other items of the surrounding culture for the centre of one or the other system – for example, regarding *Dimension 2: Play and Competitive Sports* and *Dimension 3: Performance*, Brazilian capoeira competes against parcour which competes against breakdancing in the system 'hip athletic underground youth movement culture'.

How and if a style can possess the centre of a system or polysystem depends on the way it is perceived by the surrounding culture:

As a rule, the centre of the whole polysystem is identical with the most prestigious canonized repertoire. Thus, it is the group which governs the polysystem that ultimately determines the canonicity of a certain repertoire. Once canonicity has been determined, such a group either adheres to the properties canonized by it (which subsequently gives them control of the polysystem) or, if necessary, alters the repertoire of canonized properties in order to maintain control. On the other hand, if unsuccessful in either the first or the second procedure, both the group and its canonized repertoire are pushed aside by some other group, which makes its way to the centre by canonizing a different repertoire. Those who still try to adhere to that displaced canonized repertoire can only seldom gain control of the centre of the polysystem; as a rule, one finds them on the periphery of the canonized, referred to (by the carriers of official culture) pejoratively as 'epigones'. [Even-Zohar 1990: 17]

To set this in context with the example above: the 'group which governs' the polysystem 'martial arts' in the West may be identified as modern media culture, with the currently undisputed dominance of MMA. Today, MMA is the point of reference against which pop culture reads most other martial arts. Traditional techniques 'would never work in the cage', one often hears, and even Bruce Lee's skill has to be re-assessed when internet boards discuss whether he would have been a successful UFC fighter. 'Pejoratively referred to as epigones', on the other hand, describes well the MMA world's view of the attempts of traditional karate practitioners who suddenly interpret the movement of their forms as blueprints for ground fighting.

Even-Zohar's polysystem theory provides an excellent foundation for an approach that aims to understand the martial arts' dynamic complexity. Applying the theory to the field can be a remedy for the essentialist pitfalls or oversimplifications that sometimes emerge. Glancing through the theory with both the history of martial arts and current martial arts studies in mind will lead to several striking insights. Some quotes from Even-Zohar's text may serve as further examples:

Thus, not only does [the polysystem theory] make possible the integration into semiotic research of objects (properties, phenomena) previously unnoticed or bluntly rejected; rather, such an integration now becomes a precondition, a sine qua non, for an adequate understanding of any semiotic field. This means that standard language cannot be accounted for without putting it into the context of the non-standard varieties ... the polysystem hypothesis involves a rejection of value judgments as criteria for an a priori selection of the objects of study ... No

field of study, whether mildly or more rigorously 'scientific', can select its objects according to norms of taste.  
[Even-Zohar 1990: 13]

This quote corresponds to the call for the abandonment of normative assumptions and object-language earlier in this article. The researcher has to refrain from being simultaneously a critic. And it demands that we also take into consideration the smaller, non-mainstream styles of martial arts.

Even-Zohar calls the totality of actualizations of a given system its 'repertoire'. Concerning the production of repertoire, he writes that:

**the relations which obtain within the polysystem do not account only for polysystem processes, but also for procedures at the level of repertoire. That is to say, the polysystem constraints turn out to be relevant for the procedures of selection, manipulation, amplification, deletion, etc., taking place in actual products (verbal as well as non-verbal) pertaining to the polysystem.**  
[Even-Zohar 1990: 15]

Another strength of polysystem theory when applied to martial arts studies is that it not only provides a terminology to describe the relations of styles between each other and to the surrounding culture, but also considers the conditions under which they produce the items listed above under the classes of phenomena. This provides a background to many observations made by martial arts studies scholars. Consider, for example, the following quote from Lorge:

**Because almost all martial arts in China and outside share a mostly identical palette of individual strikes, stances, and other techniques, what distinguishes one style from another is which techniques are not used, how techniques are combined, what forms [designated patterns of techniques] one performs, and the emphasis given to certain techniques over others.**  
[Lorge 2012: 207]

The selections of techniques noted by Lorge are not simply based on functionality, as many practitioners themselves believe, but result from internal processes which are typical, according to Even-Zohar:

**It is this local and temporal sector of the repertoire which is the issue of struggle in the literary (or any other semiotic) system. But there is nothing in the repertoire itself that is capable of determining which section of it can be (or become) canonized or not, just as the distinctions between 'standard',**

**'high', 'vulgar', or 'slang' in language are not determined by the language repertoire itself, but by the language system – i.e., the aggregate of factors operating in society involved with the production and consumption of lingual utterances. It is thus these systemic relations that determine the status of certain items (properties, features) in a certain 'language'.**  
[Even-Zohar 1990: 18]

The polysystem theory's model of 'canonicity' can help to analyse how techniques or concepts from one style are integrated into another one. This can happen either as 'static canonicity', where 'a certain text is accepted as a finalized product and inserted into a set of sanctified texts literature (culture) wants to preserve' [Even-Zohar 1990: 19; substitute 'text' with 'technique' and 'literature' with 'style']. Or it happens as 'dynamic canonicity', where

**a certain literary model manages to establish itself as a productive principle in the system through the latter's repertoire. It is this latter kind of canonization which is the most crucial for the system's dynamics. Moreover, it is this kind of canonization that actually generates the canon, which may thus be viewed as the group of survivors of canonization struggles.**  
[Even-Zohar 1990: 19]

An example for such a dynamic canonization might be the dissemination of the technique known as the 'double-leg takedown' in the wake of the UFC, influencing many self-defence styles. Prior to that they had before often neglected ground fighting to a large degree.

These examples shall suffice for now. Hopefully, they demonstrate the value of polysystem theory as an approach to martial arts studies. However, no theory can do more than prepare the ground for research, and all need fitting methods to bear fruit. One method that can easily be applied to our field, and that fits organically with Even-Zohar's models, is that of scientific comparison (as used, for example, in religious studies). It lends itself well to analysing the adjacent and competing styles within a martial arts polysystem, and can also provide understanding of martial arts as a general part of human culture. This is especially promising when dealing with similarities between martial arts phenomena that never stood in direct contact with each other (e.g. martial arts instructional manuals in medieval Europe and China).

Comparison is a standard, intuitive way of dealing with seemingly similar phenomena. However, it is advisable to sharpen the tools of comparison, as Oliver Freiburger did in his article on 'comparison as method and constitutive approach in religious studies' [2012]. To



Freiberger, the aim of a comparative study is not to 'show the identity of different phenomena – thus defining their postulated "true core" – but instead ... to analyse similarities and analogies regarding a certain aspect. In regards to a different aspect, the phenomena may well be different' [Freiberger 2012: 210].<sup>15</sup> He emphasizes the epistemological problem of how one can know before one compares things 'that they belong to the same category at all' [Freiberger 2012: 206].<sup>16</sup> While he admits that pre-categories are inevitable, Freiberger urges us to be extremely cautious with them (in the following quotes from his text, please substitute 'martial arts' for 'religion'):

Asking where such pre-knowledge comes from, we will get back to associative and subjective constructions ... In most cases, the religious tradition that a researcher knows best will give the frame of reference ... The danger is to look for something in another religion that, even if it exists there, has a completely different meaning, position, or relevance.<sup>17</sup>  
[Freiberger 2012: 206]

His solution to this problem is constant oscillation between definition of terms and comparison. In the field of tension between these two poles, knowledge will be gained:

The starting point for a comparative study can be a definition of terms (as wide and open as possible) to isolate the topics of the study; and a result of the comparison will be a modification and precision of the terms. These more precise terms can then be the basis for a further comparative study [which] will prevent the essentialisation of terms.<sup>18</sup>  
[Freiberger 2012: 207-208]

<sup>15</sup> 'Identität von Phänomenen festzustellen – womit ihr postuliertes "Wesen" bestimmt würde – sondern vielmehr ... Ähnlichkeiten und Analogien von Erscheinungen im Hinblick auf einen bestimmten Aspekt zu untersuchen; im Hinblick auf andere Aspekte mögen sich die Erscheinungen durchaus unterscheiden'.

<sup>16</sup> 'Woher man vor dem Vergleich weiß, dass die Gegenstände, die man vergleichen wird, überhaupt in dieselbe Kategorie gehören'.

<sup>17</sup> 'Geht man nun der Frage nach, woher dieses Vorwissen eigentlich stammt, landet man letztlich wieder bei assoziativ-subjektiven Konstruktionen ... Meist bildet diejenige religiöse Tradition, die den Forschern am besten vertraut ist, den Bezugsrahmen ... Es besteht die Gefahr, dass man in anderen Religionen nach etwas sucht, das dort – selbst wenn man es findet – eine ganz andere Bedeutung, Stellung oder Relevanz besitzt'.

<sup>18</sup> 'Der Ausgangspunkt einer Vergleichsstudie kann also eine (möglichst weite und offene) Definition der Begriffe sein, die den Gegenstandsbereich der Studie eingrenzen; und als Ergebnis des Vergleichs kann die Begrifflichkeit modifiziert und präzisiert werden. Die so präzisierten Begriffe können wiederum der Ausgangspunkt für eine weitere Vergleichsstudie sein, aufgrund derer die Definitionen wiederum modifiziert werden. Eine solche kontinuierliche gegenseitige Befruchtung von Begriffsbestimmung und Vergleich verhindert eine Essentialisierung von Begriffen und Vorstellungen'.

Freiberger demands a study of '*quantitative criteria*, which measure an item by its position and effect within a tradition' [208], while at the same time admitting that such positions and effects can be contested over time within a given tradition.<sup>19</sup> This is, obviously, a variation of Even-Zohar's model with other terms. Contrary to *quantitative criteria*, Freiberger rejects *qualitative criteria* – that is, those criteria which want to establish the 'true' features or position of a given tradition. Such criteria are normative, and aim to establish the results of a comparison before the comparison has been made. Of course, it is only suitable to compare those phenomena whose position and function in their respective system is properly analyzed. This demands familiarity with the cultural context of a martial arts style, and the necessary scientific methods to approach the phenomena that shall be compared.

Though not the only applicable method, the critically reflected comparison, as described by Freiberger, yields very good results when applied to martial arts, and answers to the heterogeneity of the field.

## CONCLUSION

One aim of martial arts studies is to observe, understand, and interpret martial arts in their various representations, their development, form, and cultural meaning. To achieve this, martial arts studies has to find ways to deal with the multifaceted and highly dynamic nature of martial arts on horizontal and vertical axes. They have to widen their perspective to a degree where the totality of the martial arts is no longer perceived through the lenses of normative or oversimplified assumptions, which were derived from a single style, or a single family of styles. This defines the horizontal axis. Instead of assuming clear cut categories of martial arts [e.g., martial arts vs. combat sports], the field should be approached without predetermined conclusions. The various classes of phenomena through which a given style is actualized, from dominant body images to its interaction with the surrounding culture, have to be analysed with the methods of the relevant academic disciplines. This describes the vertical axis. The historicity of any given style or phenomenon introduces a third dimension to the coordinate system.

Once styles and/or phenomena have been arranged on the horizontal axis, the method of scientific comparison can help in understanding them. However, the difficulties of integrating the diversity of martial arts into a coherent, comprehensible total have to be faced via a fitting

<sup>19</sup> '*Quantitative* Kriterien, die einen Gegenstand nach seiner Stellung und Wirkung innerhalb der Tradition bemessen'.

theoretical framework. The polysystem theory of Itama Even-Zohar has been proposed in this article for its ability to deal with the dynamics of martial arts especially in the modern world, and for its capacity to include results from a wide range of academic disciplines. Also, it can easily integrate the different degrees to which a given style fulfils the proposed dimensions of meaning ascribed to martial arts practices.

Martial arts have fascinated mankind for thousands of years, and have been a part of human culture ever since. They have been able to change their forms constantly and to adjust to new historical situations and cultural challenges. Only an open, truly multidisciplinary approach can hope to adequately describe a subject as complex as this. Aspiring to be more than a mere collection of results from unconnected disciplines, martial arts studies has to meet this challenge.

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